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Feminist Epistemology and James' Ways of Deriving Truth

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Abstract

In the following paper I will be comparing two trains of thought in the method of attaining knowledge, or lack thereof. The first critique will be from feminist epistemology headed by Genevieve Lloyd who argues that there is a fundamental difference in the knowledge of men and of women; the female virtues, as she states, have not been given their full voice in epistemology and philosophy in general. These virtues are of receptivity and dependence and most importantly, feelings and associations with the 'body' in the Cartesian sense. The males tend to represent the 'mind' category of the Cartesian framework as the characteristic of a universal faculty which must attain knowledge only through what Hegel calls "...stress of thought and much technical exertion. I will be comparing this framework to ideas of William James. In the *Will to Believe*, James gives a critique of Scientific Absolutism as representative of having a *dogmatic* attitude towards particulars instead of having a particular (empiricist) attitude with a goal towards attainment of content knowledge. All of this comparison will be brought together by an analysis of a combined feminist and pragmatist understanding of knowledge, reason and philosophy. Finally we shall take on a new perspective of the feminist standpoint from Phyllis Rooney who says that any characterization is bound to be tied up with gendered associations that separate and therefore degrade. I intend to argue for the feminist side in respect to the virtues that it may present as perhaps what needed in the modern era.

Feminist Epistemology and James' Ways of Deriving Truth

In Lloyds "The Man of Reason," she quotes Hegel in order to make the distinction between Male Reason and Female.

"Hegel contrasted the 'happy ideas, taste and elegance' characteristic of female consciousness with male attainments which demand a 'universal faculty'. 'Women are educated—who knows how?—as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by

acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.”¹

Lloyd argues that this male characteristic is what has been prized by philosophers since Plato. In the western tradition, for the most part, this ‘universal faculty’ has dominated philosophy and attitude of societies and way of living for centuries. For example, When Tennyson looks at a flower he plucks it, holds it and says “Little flower—but if I could understand What you are, root and all, and all in all, I should know what God and man is.”² In other words, in order to understand the flower, he must get to know *all*, essentially by finding every piece through dissection and find how all they are comprised to form a whole. In order for the male Tennyson to find knowledge, he must proceed through dissection and abstract technical separation. Whereas a person representing the feminine qualities would look at the whole of the flower just based on the aesthetic appearance that arises; not in separating emotions from impressions or things in themselves from intuitions, but from a perspective of non-dualism, which cannot be put into words easy as it represents everything in a subjective experience. One might change Tennyson’s words to say, not man and God, but just God in general; anything else said would lead to contradiction much like Heraclitus. The female represents a holism of being-in-the world. This is how we can imagine this perspective aesthetically; let’s see how this plays out in the methods attainment of knowledge.

Lloyd uses the example of the separation of ‘mind’ and ‘body’ as the drastic separation of characteristics between ‘male’ and ‘female’. Descartes’ method and philosophy stem from the acknowledgement that knowledge starts from the ‘thinking thing’ thereby equating body with pure extension of external objects, and therefore irrelevant as it could ‘deceive and tell lies’. The Male category then would be the *mind* and the Female the *body*. With the mind being primary, we see that what is characterized by this attitude is that the imaginative abstractions, if constructed sound, can yield truth if they correspond. However, the organized method of testing is the importance rather than what it is testing, in this way, and this way only, it yields truth. The method has no reliance on the subject matter itself except as a way to expound imaginative sound propositions through them. As Lloyd argues, Descartes’ method is close in comparison to that of the scientific method and also historically derivative. Thus, the method is that of strict rules in the mind only.

In expounding his ‘rules for the direction of the mind’, he attacked those truth seekers who ‘conduct their minds along unexplored routes, having no *reason* to hope for success, but merely being willing to risk the experiment of finding whether the truth they seek lies there’.” [instead his method is as follows]
“‘Certain and simple rules such that, if a man observe them accurately, he shall

¹ 293 Lloyd, Genevive; ‘The Man of Reason: “Male” and “Female” in Western Philosophy’

² This is taken from a book called Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis and was quoted by D. T. Suzuki

never assume what is false as true, and will never spend his mental efforts to no purpose, but will gradually increase his knowledge so as to arrive at a true understanding...'³

An important point to notice is the hesitancy by which Descartes has of saying a truth which is through loose method. He wants to make an assertion mean something and be true. He thinks this is attained by a strict method of the mind derivative of his metaphysical distinction and cannot imagine a *truth coming to him* on a walk or simply sitting on a surfboard in the ocean. These are not methods of attaining truth for Descartes because the contexts, i.e. a-posteriori truths, do not matter in the least bit. These truths are hazy, untraceable and usually wordlessly intuitive, but maybe that just how being-in-the-world is from the feminine perspective. This is not to say that we live in a false reality; it merely means that 'false' and 'true' are purely mental projectile phenomena and therefore no reason to be afraid if a one-to-one relationship is lacking. As James says, "I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world."⁴

So, this male tendency in knowledge is to make this separation of mind and matter, and to direct the mind from an abstract list of 'rules from the mind'. This knowledge has no context dependency but explains the context from these rules, i.e. it is independent. We can understand the female perspective as the opposite of this; as knowledge that is inclusive, i.e. what brings together the body and the mind. In the example given before of the flower, the feminine perspective would imbed them with the flux of its changing context. This is the way one may get in touch with the flower is to understand it as it is, infinite. One would get the emotional and aesthetic response from the flower as an absolute *feeling* rather than that which would be abstracted following. What is important is that this absolute is a feeling of togetherness and not an abstracted separation that bifurcates. If we would like to understand these epistemologies as derivative of their metaphysical origin, the male would be the many (bifurcation) and the female, the one (unity).

James' Paper entitled "The Will to Believe" we see a similar dichotomy by which he distinguishes ways of knowing; namely, absolutism and empiricism. They are complicated in how they work and I will do some work to expound them into the framework of Male and Female rationality. James is defending the thesis that all of rational belief is based on our non-intellectual nature. Impulses cannot help but influence statements before or after they have been released from the mouth. He argues for this on the knowledge that empiricism, which (*apparently*) prides itself on being objective, unbiased and non-contextual, simply would not investigate into evidence for

³ Lloyd, 293-294

⁴ James, William; Will to Believe, 41, 211

telepathy. This is because it would serve no use for the paradigm they are working within. This can be seen as a non-intellectual commitment to a theory on the basis of excluding what challenges it from inquiry; thereby ridding the anomaly before it had even arisen. This could have grave implications in comparison to Lloyd as the female is what would be called the non-intellectual, in the sense that it is embedded always in the context.

We attain truth then from this passional nature through two methods. The first is absolutism, which states that you *can* attain a truth and know *when* you have attained it. The empiricist on the other hand states that we can attain it but we cannot infallibly know when. Though it seems that the absolutism shows a degree of dogmatism let us keep in mind the example of the scientist looking away to telepathy. For James then, everyone is an absolutist by instinct and the empiricist contains this patriarchal absolutism method in a similar way to Descartes'. He describes empirical absolutism as thus.

[P]lease observe, now that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think....if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what is meant by its being true.⁵

So, the dogmatism is excluded from inquiry, but in doing so this is for dogmatic reasons and the empiricist becomes more objective, but secretly absolutist, by following this method. This is because the absolutist empiricist has a commitment *not* to the 'upshot' of the results but the origin and principles of the thought. The scientist has no interest in the metaphysical implications of the experiment. For example, calculations of self-organization in rats do not lead to the hypothesis that the world works that way, the worldview implied by self-organization is just a template for the calculations that may be used for technical purposes. This maybe for reasons of use, or for inscrutability; however, the point is that it is principles which matter to the empiricist. As James states, "The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the terminus a quo of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the terminus a quem."⁶

This gets worked out in a clever way to which the absolutism is presupposed by the empiricist which is characteristic through the phrase "do not believe truths upon insufficient evidence."⁷ This phrase is the absolutism itself that proceeds with empiricism, for the evidence is what makes it absolute, i.e. provided that the laws of

⁵ Pg 40

⁶ 40 will to believe

⁷ 37

mathematics are stable. Through this assumption, empiricism can make assertions for a posteriori propositions. James, who represents the other trend, attempts to start from a posteriori claims and attempts to gain absolutes therefrom. I.e. accepts that truth is futile, and accepts them for their lack of clarity and strive for a truth. For him, a truth is better than no truth. He resents the empiricist for what he calls them filled with 'excessive nervousness'. He says, "Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher."⁸

As pragmatism and feminism are practical philosophies, the conclusions are not as solid as we might wish them to be; however, their critique of philosophy is still a noble part of the conversation and is an appropriate historical response to the dominating scientific worldview. We can see uncanny parallels also between scientific absolutism, on the one hand, and the male method of absolutism on the other. They both contain skepticism of a posteriori propositions characteristic of the body which Lloyd associates with the female; like that it is cold or feels cold. Then they take *that* skepticism or the conclusions therefrom, as an absolute and create a method derivative that approaches a-posteriori propositions. James represents something similar to the feminist method of staying practical and at the same time taking the risk of talking about them. Also James' assertion that all of our ideas are based on our passional nature seems to represent how the feminine is the primary state of our knowledge. This reflects the Taoist notion that the feminine is the mysterious valley which is filled with life; much like a glass (being your mind) and knowledge (filling in like water), i.e. what makes it useful is its emptiness. In this way it is mysterious for its void like nature; as giving birth but having no ground itself besides as it pertains to the presentational intuition of feeling. In the Tao De Jing we can get similar foundations for this perspective.

"Know the male But keep to the role of the female ...and be a valley to the empire."⁹

"Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use."¹⁰

"The five colors make man's eyes blind; The five notes make his ears deaf; The five tastes injure his palate; Riding and hunting make his mind go wild with excitement; Goods hard to come by serve to hinder his progress. Hence the sage is For the belly Not for the eye. Therefore he discards the one and takes the other."¹¹

⁸ 41

⁹ Chapter 28 Tao De Jing, Lao Tzu, Translation by D. C. Lau

¹⁰ Chapter 11

¹¹ Chapter 12

If we can get one lesson from these statements it is that we must go to the origin of our knowledge if we wish to have knowledge that benefits us. This origin is rather mysterious, wordless, and possibly aggravating for the modern philosopher, but if we take the last quote to its full depth; we may find how this process works. The five colors, five tones etc. represent the distinctions we make upon perception; the male separation which hinders the observation as it forms a *mediation*, whereas a direct feeling, non-abstracted into categories, is *immediate*. Lloyd's quote of Hegel helps this reflection by saying that females attain knowledge through living or 'God knows how'. This is why "the belly" is posited as it is associated with the 'gut feeling' that is always superficially mentioned in conversation but is rarely given its full philosophical voice. If the five tones would *not* be distinguished, all would be one song, or melody. Which are the starting point and the 'point of returning'; this is the movement of the Tao.¹²

Getting back to Lloyd, there is a criticism which might change this whole dramatized picture. A contemporary philosopher imbedded in the feminist tradition by the name of Phyllis Rooney, has stated that this picture of the Cartesian separation 'forms one of the most interesting core issues in feminist epistemology.' This is of the 'maleness' of reason and as their being an ideal knower. She goes on to say,

...if we focus on the persistent metaphorical gendering of reason as male and unreason as female in our philosophical history, our attention is drawn to the emotional and imaginative substructure motivating such gendering—we find an emotional substructure characterized largely by fear of, or aversion to, "the feminine". Many recent developments in feminist epistemology that include reflection on our tradition can be seen to revolve around these two moves: resisting certain kinds of essentialist claims characteristic of our tradition ...and asking as Code does: "Out of *whose* subjectivity has this ideal [of objectivity] grown?"¹³

Rooney has made some vast statements here that might do some damage to the foundation of feminist epistemology as here characterized. She argues that this separation of mind and body-mind in Lloyd is stimulated by an encoded gendering of what is associated with maleness and femaleness. Rooney and other philosophers argue that any essentialist claim is out of ignorance for a specific quality of a gender. Namely, for the topic of our discussion, the body-mind has the essential underscore of 'non-rational' which can be seen as what feminists want to ward against which is 'essential claims'. These separations are what keep their being an essential 'difference' between male and female representatives. However, this means that the feminine qualities, or

¹² This point is that knowledge grows from emptiness through gaining form and in reaching its limits, is brought back to emptiness.

¹³ Phyllis Rooney, "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy" Pg 20 From Hypatia Vol. 8, No. 2, Feminism and Pragmatism

virtues, stand on no foundation, as they are derivative of an encoded arbitrary gendering. The modern feminist perspective stands from no perspective at all. A perspective against perspectives which is supposed to offer the reader with an infinite number of options all justified from each individual's standpoint. In this way, the separation between male and female knowledge cannot be made.

Of course, I cannot make these problems disappear especially because I am a male and anything I speak on the subject will be only subjective due to my gendering; however, I can still offer a perspective nonetheless. In this context, I believe James can come to our rescue with his conclusion that "a [possible] false belief to act on is better than no belief at all".¹⁴ This implies that even if the virtues provided by the Cartesian body-mind are incorrect as representative of a gender encoded separation, it is a belief to which feminism may stand on to represent *something*. Indeed, there have been revolts and demands that have had shaky foundations, but these have proven to be ineffective due to lack of coherence.¹⁵ No theory of change will be perfect and provide answers, as Hegel suggests there are only historical responses, but I believe feminism is the perfect voice for the opposition of the dominant destructive modern paradigm. Either the paradigm is of absolutist empiricism or patriarchy, what stands true is that the opposition to these historical phenomena can be derived from virtues of the female. Virtues such as interconnectedness, holism, feeling etc. represent an environmental ecological perspective much needed today. This can be seen as being negative in its restrictions to female capacity but the main point is that all people possess this perspective.

Taoists are talking to males when they are saying stick to the feminine. All I can say from my perspective is that I wish to represent virtues of the feminine which as argued above, is the source of knowledge ideas and well, masculinity itself. So, why not hold true to these virtues? They can be useful and there are worse evils in this world than being duped; confusion, after all, is the source of transformation.

¹⁴ James, Will to Believe 41

¹⁵ I am speaking specifically about the example of Occupy Wall Street which had multiple demands and objections but did not hold one central thesis to bring together the entirety of the protesters.